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# C.I.A. Seeks to Read Moscow Auguries

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WASHINGTON, Feb. 12 — When the Soviet leader Leonid I. Brezhnev died 15 months ago, the Reagan Administration was ready. In a memo to President Reagan, William J. Casey, the Director of Central Intelligence, picked Yuri V. Andropov as a dark horse closing fast at the finish to succeed Mr. Brezhnev.

Mr. Casey and the Soviet experts at the Central Intelligence Agency apparently were not as prescient on this occasion. When Mr. Andropov died Thursday, the C.I.A. dismissed the first news reports about the death, saying they were unfounded.

After acknowledging that the Soviet leader was dead, intelligence officials said Friday that Mikhail S. Gorbachev, a member of both the Soviet Communist Party Politburo and the Secretariat, seemed to be the most likely candidate to succeed Mr. Andropov as General Secretary of the Communist Party. Those officials said Mr. Gorbachev was followed, in order, by Grigory V. Romanov, also a member of the Politburo and the Secretariat; Defense Minister Dmitri F. Ustinov; and Konstantin U. Chernenko, the last of the three men who are members of the Politburo and the Secretariat.

By today, the consensus in the C.I.A. and the Reagan Administration was that Mr. Chernenko, a Brezhnev protégé who was outmaneuvered by Mr. Andropov in 1982, would emerge at least temporarily as the new Soviet leader.

The initial betting on Mr. Gorbachev illustrated the difficulty of trying to analyze, much less predict, the decisions and actions of the Soviet leadership, intelligence officials said. Mr. Gorbachev, although the youngest member of the Politburo at 52, was widely believed to be Mr. Andropov's personal choice for a successor.

## Passed Over Once

Mr. Chernenko was not only passed over once for the top spot, but was also associated with an old-guard leadership that Mr. Andropov had indirectly criticized. He is 72 years old. His selection, intelligence offi-

cials said, would probably reflect a reluctance among older Soviet leaders to turn over power to younger men like Mr. Gorbachev who might rule for 20 years or more.

As the C.I.A.'s Soviet analysts scrambled over the weekend to keep up with developments in Moscow, they could appreciate the assessment of Richard Helms, a former C.I.A. director, who described the Kremlin leadership as "the toughest target of all" for American intelligence agencies.

"If Chernenko is not officially named in the next 24 hours, we'll know there's a donnybrook going on in the leadership," one intelligence official said.

The deliberations inside the Kremlin cannot be photographed by American satellites. Nor can the conversations and politicking in the Politburo be monitored by electronic eavesdropping equipment, intelligence officials say. They said the United States was once able to collect information by intercepting the radio conversations of Soviet leaders as they rode around Moscow in limousines. The Soviets eventually learned about that practice and ended it by encoding the communications.

The C.I.A. depends on information gathered by agents and collected from sources both inside the Soviet Union and abroad. "It's old-fashioned intelligence," one C.I.A. official said. "The Kremlin is one place where we can't depend on high technology to penetrate the target."

This weekend the C.I.A.'s experts on the Soviet Union, directed by Robert M. Gates, the Deputy Director for Intelligence who is a Soviet authority himself, pored through volumes of computerized information about Soviet leaders.

Working in a nondescript office building in Vienna, Va., a Washington suburb, the staff of the Soviet department prepared papers for Administration officials about the succession process itself, compiled profiles of leading candidates, and examined the implications for the Soviet Union and the United States of the selection of

specific individuals as the new General Secretary.

## Chairman of Commission

The growing consensus that Mr. Chernenko will succeed Mr. Andropov, intelligence officials said, was based primarily on his selection as chairman of the funeral commission and on his appearance at the head of the line when Soviet leaders passed by Mr. Andropov's body.

Within days of Mr. Brezhnev's death in November 1982, the C.I.A. produced a 29-page classified report on Mr. Andropov that included a detailed account of agency reports on his background, his ascent to power, an assessment of his likely impact on the Soviet Government and relations with the West, and a description of his personal life and health.

In a summary, according to an Administration official, the report concluded that "Andropov will be a formidable adversary." The report added: "He is perhaps the most complicated and puzzling of all the current Soviet leaders. He is ruthless, clever, well-informed, a tough fighter and cunning."

Much of the report, intelligence officials said, was drawn from the Soviet press, interviews with Soviet defectors and émigrés and observations by American intelligence agents and diplomats in Moscow. The lack of inside sources, the officials said, was evident in the report's comment that Mr. Andropov had married twice but it was unclear whether his second wife was alive. On Saturday intelligence officials in Washington felt the confusion about that issue had been resolved when Mr. Andropov's widow, Tatyana, appeared beside the bier in Moscow.

Intelligence officials declined to describe in detail this weekend's C.I.A. reports about the policies and health of Mr. Chernenko, Mr. Gorbachev or other Soviet leaders, except to say that Mr. Chernenko might prove to be a interim leader. They said Mr. Chernenko has suffered for years from emphysema.

The key power broker in the succession, as he was when Mr. Brezhnev died, is probably Marshal Ustinov, the officials said.